



## June 8, 2009 - Putting Children First

Now that June is here, educators are instilling the last of this year's lessons to the children they have led through learning for the last 9 months. As teachers grade their last papers and projects, many are feeling the effects of this powerful but exhausting work.



*Photo by Simona Monatti*

I have met with over 400 teachers this school year and observed at least 300 classrooms. One thing that is clear from these visits is that to do this work well—to create learning from millions of moments with children, over 3 seasons and 180 days every year—requires even more than professional expertise, knowledge, high expectations, patience, wisdom, compassion, and creativity. At the beginning and end of every school year, our bodies remind us that it takes pure *stamina* to accept the challenge of educating children every day.

## Youthful Reminders: Wildly Waving Hands

Whether in the central office, business meetings, newspapers...anywhere that is not a classroom, it is fairly easy to become distracted with the many adult concerns over initiatives, policies and decisions that affect an amorphous thing called a “school system.”

But in a classroom, it is impossible to forget the consequences of every decision, impossible to ignore the 25 curious children in front of you who need something from you in every single moment. There, the reminders of your goals and priorities are more demanding than the spreadsheets and emails that occupy those who work outside schools.



*Photo by Belen Perez Gabilondo*

These reminders are wildly waving hands fueled by burning questions and ideas. If you are a teacher, “status reports” on your shortcomings are immediate, whether through puzzled looks on students’ faces, or bold assessments of your clarity and delivery from people who are not yet burdened with tact.

I believe that for people whose job is to direct every moment of their work and stores of their energy to children’s advantage, this enormous responsibility actually takes physical strength to carry. Despite the immense rewards that keep teachers coming back year after year, I have not yet met an educator who doesn’t feel it by June.

## Teacher Snapshots

To really understand what it takes for a teacher to put children first, you simply have to hear the stories from teachers. Next week we will begin to publish Teacher Snapshots—brief interviews with DCPS teachers—on [our website](http://www.k12.dc.us) ([www.k12.dc.us](http://www.k12.dc.us)). Their reflections and observations are powerful, and speak to the caliber of the many extraordinary teachers in our schools, doing the world’s most important work.

## Prioritizing Children in Government, Education Policy, Systemic Reform and Operations

Since all of us cannot be teachers, how can the rest of us put children first? Even for work in education that occurs outside of the classroom, we can make sure the urgent waving hands dominate our vision. If we want our work to have meaning, our responsibilities to children must drive every single decision that we make—and the further we are from the classroom, the more discipline this takes.

Politicians often visit our schools, and their conversations with children in one day can provide all the information they need to base their decisions on the needs of children. If they are courageous, they choose children in their decisions even when there is a political cost and they have to take a hit in their popularity with adults.

## How can a “faceless” government agency “put children first?”

This phrase can sound like just words without concretely showing how the potential of children can direct an entire system of schools.



*Photo by Belen Perez Gabilondo*

This summer we will release a progress report to illustrate the work that has occurred in our second year of reform, but I’d like to highlight some of the decisions and priorities that are moving through the entire system now to change the educational outcomes we have seen in prior years in this district.

## Initiatives that Prioritize Children

Here are just a few of the decisions we have made at the central level that put children first. All of these decisions show that a child’s greatest resource is the tireless adult who is guiding the way:

- **Empowering Educators to Achieve at High Levels**

There is no question that in a system in which about 60% of students are not proficient in their basic skills, that the hardest work in changing this falls to principals and teachers. This year we are putting significant funding behind the belief that with the proper professional development supports, teachers have immense power to direct the life outcomes of their students.

For 123 schools we added 150 professional developers to work in schools. There they can get to know teachers and their styles in order to support them more significantly. Next year we are increasing our professional development supports by 400% to bring professional development straight to the schools where it matters most.

We have even adjusted our school calendar around this priority, working with the community over the past few months to add this important work while respecting the partnership and support that school schedules require of parents.

- **Giving Children Access to Art, Music and PE**

Last year we learned that in part due to the way school budgets were created, many students—often in the highest need wards—were not getting the same access to art, music and PE that other students were. We changed our budgeting process to prioritize the important school positions every child should have access to, pushing more money to schools away from the central office.

- **Rewarding Success in Teaching**

When an entire school staff—from the principal and teachers to counselors, librarians, custodians and others—works together to focus children on academics, they achieve impressive results. But historically in public school systems, it has been hard for educators to get the recognition that they deserve and that can help to motivate them to continue the hard work.

Last year we initiated TEAM Awards to reward the entire school staffs who achieved 20 % point gains in both math and reading. Each principal in these schools received \$10K, each teacher received \$8K, and other school staff received at least \$2K. Every other profession seems to have a way to financially reward those who do well, and there is no reason we cannot do it in education.

- **More Adults Added at Both “Ends of Need”**

As is true in many other urban districts, two groups of students in particular require our significant and immediate attention: students at the pre-kindergarten level, when the foundations for verbal cognition and literacy are built, and students who are either overage or otherwise struggling to succeed in the traditional school environment.

Knowing the power that adults have to meet their needs, we have directed more adults to work with both groups. We added 15 new pre-kindergarten campuses this year, and created the Youth Engagement Academy and Twilight Program, both serving students who are not succeeding in the traditional environment and overage students, respectively.

I am encouraged that already last year we started to see the graduation rate climb. In fact, after increasing summer school options we saw the summer school graduation rate actually triple, moving from 150 in 2007 to 470 last summer.

- **Putting All Students First, Including Students with Special Needs**

Recently we held a community forum focusing on the exciting reforms to special



education that we are implementing now, and I was glad to see the crowd that came out to discuss this important topic.

So much has happened this year to give parents of students with special needs many reasons to be hopeful about the future of special education in DCPS. I was especially pleased to see the interest in the inclusion model we are moving to in DCPS as we take the steps to leave behind the historical segregation of special education students in this city.

[Read more about special education initiatives in DCPS.](#) We will also be posting notes from the discussions online.

## Remembering our Objective

“Putting children first” is no platitude. Whether we work at DCPS, in federal or city government, or any other capacity, it is a guiding principle that will result in shared success if we are courageous enough to put our actions behind it without compromise, even in favor of the sticky adult priorities of professional reputation and security that we all value.



*Photo by Brian Tropiano*

There are enormous stakes in the complicated equation of public education reform. What keeps me hopeful is that our objective is very simple, and it always will be: it is to put children’s potential, academic needs and education before any other concern we face.

There are countless difficult decisions to make in every school district, whether about policy, budgets, union contracts, timelines, plans, or any topic affecting student achievement. But all of them become easier, and we can see them most clearly, when we see what teachers see: the children's waving hands that rally for our attention with every decision we make.

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